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## MINERVA MECHANICA<sup>1</sup>

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Of all modern inventions, the typewriter is perhaps the nearest approach to an artificial mind. Its delicate compactness all but holds the potentialities of thought. It is fairly bursting with alphabetical possibilities, and at times one almost expects to see it in the act of exploding into literature. But luckily, that phenomenon never happens, for it still needs a mind behind it. More than this, if manual skill is lacking, even the most powerful brain makes a bad mess in the use of it. Somewhere in the process the living idea goes to pieces. The larger part of the mental energy is wasted in the mere effort to manage the abominable thing. In such an event the beautiful action of the machine, with the precise thrust of its letter-bars, is chill comfort to the exasperated performer. Rather he has recourse to the inward conviction that no Plato or Vergil or Shakespeare ever poured typewritten masterpieces on the world.

We are at present in the typewriter stage of education. We are all for speed, convenience, technical perfection, immediate results. If only there were co-ordination between the soul of the thing and the process! Aye, there's the rub. The trouble is that we are so absorbed in making it all work that we forget what we set out to do. There is such nervous haste to erase mistakes, to repair breaks, to make fair copy, that there is little time or force calmly to elaborate that which we are frantically striving to express. Method has enwrapped our souls as in a mist. The temper of the twentieth century has penetrated all our institutions of learning, and in the midst of our violent academic leisure we all must have had opportunity to study it. The inevitable conclusion is that the root of the difficulty lies in the fact that, owing to our restless inventiveness, the balance between pure learning on the one hand and the expression of learning on the other has been disturbed, whether in instruc-

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Classical Association of New England at the Sixth Annual Meeting, Exeter, N.H., April 1, 1911.

tion or in creative work. Time was when pure scholarship was wholly out of proportion to its inadequate mechanical means of expression, with the result that the personality of the scholar was its own best expression. Now the relation is reversed, so that the riches of scholarship and the energies of the scholar are drained off through a thousand channels. As Masterman says in his *Condition of England*, "Modern civilization in its most highly organized forms has elaborated a system to which the delicate fiber of mind and body is unable to respond." The state of things was already sufficiently parlous even before a mechanical engineer on a steel foundation investigated our universities and colleges and told us how to run them for efficiency. If this is progress, it is that which Carlyle describes. "If we examine it well," says he, "it is the marching of that gouty patient, whom his doctors had clapt on a metal floor, artificially heated to the searing-point, so that he was obliged to march, and did march with a vengeance—no-whither."

Now it is not enough to say that the classics have been, as by their nature they should be, the last to feel this influence. They, at least, ought not to be subject to the disease at all. They should be the one instance of a wholesome opposition to it though all else fail. If there is anywhere an influence that has its springs in calmness and meditation it is to be found in the classics, and it follows as the night the day that the devotee of the classics must himself be meditative and calm. To be too modern in the presence of the ancient, to use tools on a mental atmosphere, is not only futile, but also a confession that one is not of the elect. "Save the classics at any cost," is the cry, and so we go into action with the rest, elaborate our methods, plan our campaigns, perfect our operations—and hope for the morning. Do we ever stop to think of the misdirection of zeal that strains for the salvage of a force that itself has been a salvation of the centuries?

In view of this universal tendency, of this often admirable activity, one exposes himself to the charge of heresy if he bids his colleagues face square about and do nothing for a time save look up and gain inspiration from the scene above them. Yet I make bold to do precisely this, even to maintain that the real Olympus and Parnassus still rise cool and calm, that the gods and the Muses of old are there undisturbed, and that the better course,

even for our practical ends, is to go up and commune with them. To the possible criticism that this is visionary, it may be replied that it is precisely vision that we need. But I readily yield to the call to come down to the level of facts, on the condition, however, that we appropriate such facts as shall enable us to go up again.

With a view, then, to practical matters, it should be remarked in the first place that we are violating a fundamental rule in that, to use an outdoor expression, we do not "travel light." Too much of our strength is expended on superfluous luggage. A certain amount of impedimenta is necessary, of course, but with the years has come a vast accumulation of it, until what was intended as an aid has become in reality a hindrance. I do not refer to illustrative material that makes the past live again for ourselves and our students. That is our telescope. The wider the sweep of distant scenery at our command the better. Nor do I mean those aids in the way of reference and of information that localize our work. They are our guidebooks. The results of the labors of field experts must be had and used at any cost. The more of the true sort the better. But why is it that we find so many of our students "seraphically free from taint of personality"? Thomas Arnold used to say: "I call that the best theme which shows that the boy has read and thought for himself; that the next best which shows that he has read several books and digested what he has read; and that the worst which shows that he has followed one book and followed that without reflection." What would Arnold do today with some of our school editions where Vergil and Cicero lie neatly concealed beneath a mass of annotative gelatin? In four school editions of Latin authors, taken at random, the total number of pages of text is 709, while the number of pages of notes is 795. In four college editions of Latin authors, taken at random with the exception of one where the editor's notorious zeal afforded a temptation to fatten statistics too great to be resisted, there is a total of 374 pages of Latin text to 860 pages of notes, exclusive of introductions. It is this sacrificing of the great original on the altar of great originality that is a bane of our modern training in the classics. It is an open question if our fathers, with all their poverty of extraneous "helps," did not get closer to that essence that had "some relish of salvation in 't." From the nature of things, how can a

student with a given amount of time at his disposal get into the heart of an author's thought and style, when it is expected of him that in the attempt to do so he must spend a large fraction of that time in familiarizing himself with Professor Blank's ideas on the subjunctive? In that time he might have memorized ten verses of the *Aeneid*, and if only ten, even so to his everlasting good. It is no wonder that the average student comes to eschew these condiments altogether, and bolts his daily food almost whole, with certain easily obtainable dilutions to wash it down; in which case it is better for him to hold in his hand twelve books of solid *Aeneid* than six books plus an equal bulk of what to him is nothing but waste paper. For my part, I confess to a strong tendency toward reaction in this matter. Better results are obtained, I feel convinced, by an immediate approach to the original text. This is not a plea for the wholesale abandonment of annotated editions for the classroom. They are useful just in so far as they lead directly to the end in view, the mastery of the authors. Many editions might be named whose notes are in themselves a literary delight and make needed trails leading straight to the fountain instead of bristling brushwood around it. But, in the last analysis, it is the teacher's business to teach, to be his own bureau of information to his classes, and not to conduct a daily examination on a mass of notes. It is with something like this in mind that, as a part of their reading, we have this year placed in the hands of our Freshmen Mackail's little book, *The Hundred Best Latin Poems*, with not an English word to mar the fair Latin, save on the title-page and in the Preface. Each instructor gives such comments on the daily assignments as he sees fit. The result is a sense of real teaching and learning matched on common ground, and of a certain fine excitement among the students, as of the first-hand discovery of poets. The great gift of classical training is the development in the student of the power of reasoning, of interpretative analysis, and of critical judgment. It is better that for the time he should form erroneous judgments and reach false conclusions in matters of detail, provided he does so as a result of his own thinking, than that he should appropriate second-hand truth like an automaton. Furthermore, it is the function and privilege of the teacher, not of the editor, to lead him to correct opinions and to mark the way

through difficulties. Jealously to conserve this right is the teacher's duty not only to himself but to those committed to his instruction.

We may well go farther and extend our revolt against mechanical "helps" that become mechanical clogs to our personal acquisition as teachers. As interpreters of the classics and of their spirit the great essential is that we come ourselves into priestly touch with our source of inspiration. To do this we must first go in alone. Nor is it an insuperable objection to indulgence of this kind, even in the case of those who are handicapped by a New England conscience in its worst form, that, after all, it is what one would most like to do. What teacher of literature in some weary and reckless hour has not thrown to the winds papers and marks and commentaries and all pestiferous machinery, probably with the firm belief that he was doing a selfish thing, and permitted himself a debauch of reading in some author, only to find that next day and for many days he has made ample atonement for his neglect of business by his increased enthusiasm? Among the most valuable words spoken at the meetings of this association were those of Professor Seymour at our first gathering in Springfield, when he urged us to steep ourselves, all paraphernalia aside, in our Greek and Latin. It is well to refresh our minds, too, with Macaulay's definition of a scholar: "A scholar is one who reads Plato with his feet on the fender."

But the presence of superfluous impedimenta is only one phase of a tendency that reveals itself still more widely in what we are pleased to call method and system. Method is not unessential. But by its very nature it postulates an end to be reached, and the voluntary strain toward an end never passes into involuntary power, especially if, as is likely to happen, method comes to be emphasized as the *summum bonum* of the process. Here again classical instruction in this country has been drawn within the sweep of the general error. This is the sixth annual meeting of this association. An examination of the programs of the first five meetings lends corroboration to my point. Of a total of 61 papers read only 13, or 21 per cent, were on distinctly literary topics; 15 are best listed under the head of miscellaneous, while 33, or 54 per cent of the whole, were on subjects connected with technique and methods. Unhappily for my statistics, but happily for my peace of mind, the present program does not aid my argu-

ment. Important as are the mechanical details of teaching, they can and do settle themselves before a rush of enthusiasm for the thing that is taught. It is on the motionless log-jam that the rivermen are always busiest with their cant-hooks. On the principle that our gatherings by their tone must indicate our state of mind, it may not be wide of the mark to say that it would be a perfectly natural thing, rather the expected thing, for a group of people engaged in the teaching of literature to put their annual opportunity for intercourse to a literary use, with a view to gaining mutual help through an exchange of new knowledge from all portions of their field and from the common study of authors. Perhaps, on our return from such an event we should not deplore overmuch that for once we had discussed our authors to a greater extent than how to teach them. They would be more likely thereafter to teach themselves.

The evils arising from a large elaboration of methods are subjective and objective. Subjectively, or as regards the teacher, technique is a personal, in some respects an incommunicable, thing wrought out of individual experience and adapted to local conditions. The methods that work perfectly with one may fatally hamper another. Objectively also, or as concerns the pupil, technique is necessarily localized and individualized, and in any case it should be submerged. Otherwise we have the precious product deliciously portrayed by Arbuthnot in his *Martin Scriblerus*. The pedantic father taught his son geography by giving him a geographical suit of clothes, and geometry by drawing parallel lines on his bread and butter. "But," the record states, "what most conduced to Cornelius' attainment of Greek was his love of gingerbread, which his father caused to be stamped with the letters of the Greek alphabet; and the very first day the child ate as far as Iota."

On the other hand, and still with reference to the student, are we fully alive to the dynamics of the classics when allowed to play directly on the mind of youth? As I see it, our main task is not to manipulate this power, but rather to march the student straight up to the circle of it. Every one of us must have received his surprise at some time or other, when, after all the batteries of method had been exhausted in vain on some pachydermatous pupil, the latter had been awakened gradually to life by the light working its own way with him without aid or interference. It may be charged that this too is

method, but if it is then it is method of the direct and primal kind that in reality is a process of Nature, and against such there is no law.

Whatever its phases, the disease is a fundamental restlessness. We seem incapable of following a consistent line of action for any length of time. Something is wrong, nobody knows what—well then, find out by tinkering: put a new bolt here, another shaft there; remove this screw; try a new lubricator. But the fatal fact is that every change involves ten other changes, each experimental like the last. It is far from my thought to decry progress; my whole plea is for the higher progress that comes with calm thinking and the fitting of forces to new conditions. New methods are good, provided they are the natural outgrowth of the central energy instead of excrescences on the periphery. To take an example, the new Latin entrance requirements are most welcome for this very reason. Those who have been mainly responsible for this reform have performed a great service to the cause of the study of Latin, and all the more so because of their firm opposition to capricious and individual attempts to better an average good. Just as I would prefer to have a boy of mine receive four years of consistent instruction under one second-rate master than the same amount under a succession of four first-rate masters changing annually, so I prefer an imperfect system perfectly tried to incessant agitation to attain the so-called “perfect.” Somewhere and somehow there must be a sense of confidence and repose. There is such a thing as endowment through permanence.

The feeling of security in our classical heritage is half the battle. Its dignity and its strength are as great as ever. It is now what it has always been—calm and deep and rich, the embodied antithesis to the noisy, the superficial, and the mechanical. The classics, even Greek, have not yet “gone to the tomb of all the Capulets.” But we have been so busy striving to adjust them to the times that we have forgotten that they are self-adjusted to all times. There is a reasonable hope for them, as for all pure learning, when her votaries shall have enthroned the Minerva of old—

From his awful head  
Whom Jove brought forth in warlike armor drest,  
Golden, all radiant . . .

in place of a puppet-goddess worked by strings.